

Virginia Gardening

with Jim May

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Hydrangeas are old-fashioned workhorses in the garden

By Jim May

There are some plants that every garden should have in them. Viburnum is one genus that has so many interesting and different species that it needs to be on the list and the other is Hydrangea. After all, what other genus of woody plants has flower shapes ranging from flat to round to cone-shaped; colors from white to pink and blue and everything in between and sizes from 2 feet to vines over 30 feet tall? None other than I know of.

The flowers of hydrangeas are categorized by their shape. No matter what the species, those with round flower clusters are called mop heads or snowballs, named after the most well known species with that flower shape, *Hydrangea macrophylla*, or the bigleaf hydrangea.

This plant is hardy in zones six to nine, making it suitable for anywhere in Virginia. It should, however, be planted in a protected area out of winter winds and some protection from afternoon sun is recommended in the warmer parts of the state. Amend the soil with plenty of organic matter, like compost or peat moss, and keep the soil moist to avoid wilting.

The color of the flowers on this species is the subject of much experimentation and debate. I don't pretend to be an expert on this, but my understanding is that it is the concentration of aluminum ions in the soil that makes the color of the blooms change from blue to pink. Aluminum becomes more available to plants at a low, or acid pH and the flowers will be blue. Aluminum sulphate can be worked into the soil to make this change. 'Nikko Blue' is an old-fashioned cultivar that has reliably blue flowers, especially in acid soils.

Pink flowers appear on plants in higher pH, or sweeter, soil. Obviously, this color variation is dependent on the cultivar chosen and if you try to change a blue cultivar to pink or vice versa, it will confuse not only the plant, but you as well. 'Forever Pink' and 'Pia' are two compact varieties with pink flowers.

Some cultivars of the bigleaf hydrangea have flattened flowers, and are called lacecaps. They have unusual flowers with an airy, delicate look. The flower clusters typically have fertile flowers in the center, ringed by larger sterile flowers. This effect is amplified in variegated cultivars that have flowers or leaves edged in white, cream or even pale lime color.

The smooth hydrangea (*H. arborescens*) flowers on new wood and can be pruned radically in fall or early spring. This shade lover produces so many light pink to white flowers that one of its common names is Hills of Snow hydrangea. Probably the best smooth hydrangea cultivar is the superior 'Annabelle'.

Peegee hydrangea (*H. paniculata* 'Grandiflora') can reach 10 to 15 feet in height and many times is trained to look like a small tree. This old-fashioned shrub is so large and coarse that it can

overwhelm small landscapes and should be reserved for areas where it can spread out. It blooms in late summer when few other plants are in flower. Its graceful, arching branches and long, cone-shaped clusters of flowers open white and age to beautiful shades of rose. Smaller cultivars such as 'Tarvida' are available.

Oakleaf hydrangea (*H. quercifolia*) is well named, for its leaves do look like oak leaves. This southern native offers something in every season. In summer, it has cone-shaped clusters of white flowers up to one foot long. The deep green leaves turn shades of red, orangish brown and purple in the fall and are quite spectacular.

The bark is a rich cinnamon brown that exfoliates, or peels with age. This plant has a rather coarse texture, but used in mass plantings it can be quite impressive. Its fall color alone makes it worth planting. 'Snow Flake' and 'Snow Queen' are two large cultivars that reach six feet. 'Sikes Dwarf' and 'Pee Wee' are smaller ones that reach only 3 feet.

Climbing hydrangea (*H. anomala petiolaris*) is a woody clinging vine unmatched by any other. This robust climber typically reaches heights of over 30 feet but can be kept in bounds by pruning. Its dark green, glossy leaves are especially handsome all summer and when gone, the deep rich cinnamon-colored exfoliating bark is exposed. Its flowers are white, flattened and fragrant.

This plant likes some afternoon shade and in the eastern part of Virginia that is essential. I have seen it growing up brick chimneys and stone walls to great effect. Every season brings out another fine feature and it has a certain three dimensional quality that gives depth to the structure it is covering when the leaves are gone. It is an amazing plant and highly recommended.

If you do not have any hydrangeas in your landscape, you ought to give them a try and give your garden a new look with these old-fashioned favorites. These versatile, old-fashioned shrubs not only produce sumptuous petals of color to add beauty to your garden, they add graceful layers of texture to any landscape.

Virginia Gardening with Jim May is brought to you by the Virginia Green Industry Council and the Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services.